

Chinese Evacuation Operations Part 2: A New Narrative

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As China's security posture and foreign policy become more assertive, stories about evacuation operations message these capabilities to the Chinese population and to the world. Chinese war movies in recent years have become more nationalistic and explicit. These movies have included *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (智取威虎山), 2014; *Wolf Warrior* (战狼), 2015; *Operation Mekong* (湄公河行动), 2016; and *Sky Hunter* (空天猎), 2017. Most recently films have featured the People's Liberation Army (PLA) operating abroad in reference to overseas citizen protection operations in *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) and *Operation Red Sea* (2018). Given that all movies must be approved for release by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this is a significant trend, which Part 2 in this series will explore.

A new movie genre

The 2017 blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2* (战狼 2), set in an unidentified war-torn African country (in a loose reference to the Libyan evacuations of 2011), became [Chinese cinema's highest-earning film ever](#). It tells the story of a Chinese special forces soldier who comes out of retirement to fight Western mercenaries and facilitate the evacuation of a group of distressed Chinese.

China's official foreign policy is that of noninterference in other nations' affairs. The movie's tagline suggests the very opposite — 'Whoever offends China will be killed no matter how far away the target is'.¹ The final frame of the movie reinforces the expectation that China will use its power to protect its increasing interests abroad. It shows the back cover of a People's Republic of China (PRC) passport with the following written in Chinese characters:

Citizens of the Peoples' Republic of China: When you are in danger overseas, don't give up! Remember, behind you, there is a powerful motherland.²

Apparently one patriot was denied exit privileges for copying the slogan onto the back of his passport. The message from customs included the following note:

Don't write or draw on your passport! Don't lose your mind after watching *Wolf Warrior*! It's just a movie! Vandalized or altered passports are invalid! (Magpie Kingdom 2018).

Last year the movie *Operation Red Sea* (红海行动), directed by Hong Kong filmmaker Dante Lam, was presented in Chinese cinemas as part of the celebrations of the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the PLA. It depicted an even more unlikely representation of a Chinese evacuation operation (apparently based on the evacuation from Yemen in 2015). The movie tells the implausible tale of a team of eight Chinese 'sea dragon' marines who are deployed into the desert of a fictional African country ('Yewaire') during a coup d'état in search of one Chinese hostage, creating an impressive trail of destruction that included engaging in a tank battle and leaving several of their team killed in action (Liu 9/3/2018). The real evacuation from Yemen in 2015 saw around 900 evacuees being loaded onto three PLA Navy ships in the shortest time possible. It appears this occurred without any combat, which is obviously the preferred outcome in such missions.

The movie apparently sought to be more realistic and less jingoistic than its immediate predecessors. It is certainly more violent. Professor Song Geng of the University of Hong Kong noted that:

Some of the fans of the film have no experience of going abroad. The film caters to the fantasy of the common people as China's economic power rises ... [they are] longing for the renegotiation of China's place in the world (Liu 9/3/2018).

Film critic Guo Songmin was less impressed: 'Frankly speaking, in these several movies, China has imagined itself as another US' (Guo Songmin, quoted in Clover and Ju 20/5/2018).

Of particular interest is the closing scene of the movie, which appears to be completely unrelated to the rest of the

storyline. It cuts briefly to the scene of a fleet entering an archipelago (possibly an American task force entering the Spratly Islands). A warning is announced by PLAN that the flotilla is entering the sovereign territory of China and should turn around. This appears to be a message to both domestic and international audiences.

Sensitivities and capabilities

Despite this desire to portray the PLA performing heroically in combat, the fact is that the PLA has had no such experience since the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979.³ The PLA and the CCP appear sensitive to this apparent weakness and seek to counteract it with a narrative of combat readiness. As one commentator from the Chinese media observed in relation to the ninetieth birthday of the PLA: 'Xi's repeated calls for combat readiness could literally mean that PLA is sorely lacking combat readiness' (Wang 14/1/2018).

Conscious that lack of experience could lead to a lack of confidence in the force, the PLA seeks to expand its knowledge of the realities of combat through peacekeeping missions in Africa and through the experience of others. A Chinese military spokesman recently commented: 'The PLA is the only major military force that has no real battle experience and it is very eager to get its hands on some real lessons' (Chan 29/7/2018).

These recent Chinese war movies also showcase some of the PLA's latest military equipment: *Operation Red Sea* has a Type 054A frigate and a Type 071 amphibious transport dock; *Sky Hunter* included aerial manoeuvres by a J-20 stealth fighter and a Y-20 military transport; and *Wolf Warrior 2* included the PLA's Type 59D tank and Type 05 self-propelled howitzer (Clover and Ju 20/5/2018). Chinese naval expert Li Jie believes that 'the comprehensive national strength of China has risen by a large margin and in some aspects even surpasses other leading powers' and that these movies aim to 'generate pride in the nation' (Li Jie, quoted in Xi 6/2/2018).

As the PLA's capability to project force and protect Chinese citizens overseas continues to grow, so does the Party's readiness to use the policy of overseas citizen protection and the Chinese people's expectation that they will do so.

As Chinese power and influence expands (Connolly 5/6/2017), and Chinese confidence grows with it, the policy of overseas citizen protection could be used for more than just what the Western world understands as 'evacuation operations'. Referred to in military circles as 'non-combatant evacuation operations', these are understood as benign in their intent and limited in their scope and duration. It is important to remember that [Article 50 of the PRC constitution](#) talks

about protecting the 'rights and interests' of Chinese citizens abroad. Overseas citizen protection, having been normalised domestically by movies and internationally as a 'public good', could be enacted not to evacuate Chinese personnel, but to protect them and the state's interests in place.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Translated by Graeme Smith, 10/12/2017. The last character — *zhu* — can mean 'kill' or 'execute', but most often it means 'punish'.
2. Translated by Shaun Gessler, 16/11/2017. Image can be found [here](#).
3. There was a brief maritime skirmish by PLAN against the Vietnamese Navy in the Spratly Islands in 1988 but this is not viewed as significant combat experience.

